Buildings, Manners and Laws

The Charleston Single House as a Definer of Urban Form and Shaper of City Life

Robert Russell

When Charles Town was incorporated as Charleston, South Carolina in 1783, just over 100 years after being established, she adopted as her municipal motto the Latin phrase *Aedes, Mores Legaque Curat* – "she takes care of her buildings, her manners and her laws." It tells a lot about what kind of place Charleston is. The buildings I want to talk about here are houses, one particular – and particular to Charleston – house type especially. It is known as the "single house." There are, as I will show, particular ways of living – manners – that go with this kind of house and with a city made up of these houses. There may not ever have been any laws in Charleston regulating building types (though there were, and continue to be, plenty of building regulations) but there seems to have been something that urged individuals in a similar direction over a long period of time. And it certainly is the case that some general principles – rules, if not quite laws – can be drawn from an examination of Charleston domestic architecture that are still suitable for use today.

The Single House

The single house is unique to Charleston. This is a remarkable thing to say about any architectural form, for there are very few examples of this sort of singularity in the history of architecture. The most immediately recognizable characteristic of the single house is

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The Robert Brewton house as it looked in the 1700 (above), and today (right). It is frequently cited in literature about Charleston as the earliest surviving single

that it is turned sideways to the street – that is, it has its short side where most have their long side.[1] This is not, in itself, enough to define the Charleston single house, for there are numerous places where houses are oriented in this manner. There are plenty of examples of houses that have merely been cranked around on their lots, even in Charleston. The Robert Brewton house, of around 1733 (pictured above), is frequently cited in literature about Charleston as the earliest surviving single house. It is indeed turned sideways to the street, but all that means is that it looks like a regular Georgian house that has been mislaid. Now it is true that old views show the house as once having had more to it than it does now, so it is possible that it might represent an early stage in single house development.[2] It is only a single room wide, which is where the name for the type comes from, but I would not go so far as to call it a single house.

To be a single house, it must have a porch, something like the Robert Brewton house had a century ago. And the porch must be attached to the side of the house, not to its front. In Charleston the common term for this side porch is piazza.[3]

The piazza is on the side of the single house for several reasons, all of them good. Many houses in Charleston, single or otherwise, are brought right up to the street and so there is no room for a front porch. The piazza can serve an important function as a sun break and general shading device for the house, which is why it generally appears on the south or west sides of houses, rather than the north or east. But the most important reason that piazzas are located on the side, it seems to me, is because that is where the front door of the single house is.

What this adds up to is a rectangular house turned sideways to the street, with the entrance door set more or less in the middle of the long side, rather than on the street. It does not take a lot of thinking to recognize a problem here. This is a patently unsatisfactory house type. It is not, clearly, a row house. Neither is it in any reasonable sense a self-contained, freestanding house, for one does not experience it as such. It lacks almost all street presence, for its most dignified element, the entryway, is hidden down the side of the house.

The piazza, that multi-purpose problem solver, solves all of these potential problems. One of the most characteristic elements of the Charleston single house piazza is that it is not only a side porch, but also acts as a main entrance to the house, for its street side is not merely defined by more balusters, but is screened by a solid wall with a door in it.

The ground floor street façade of the single

house presents an entrance door bay with two window bays next to it (see photo, below). Upon looking up at the second floor, however, it becomes evident that the entrance door leads not into the house, but into a space along side it: the piazza.

The final characteristic, but still curious, element of the single house is that its "back" side – the side away from the entrance and the piazza – is frequently only marginally fenestrated. There might well be a window letting light into the stair hall in the center of the house, but the two main rooms themselves will have no windows on the side away from the piazza.

A flexible form

A characteristic of the single house type is its remarkable elasticity. It can expand and contract without losing its coherence; more so, I think, than any other kind of American house. They can be quite modest (see photo, following page), or they can be very grand indeed, but it is the same type, merely expanding or shrinking as resources and lot sizes allow.

The single house can balloon up to almost five stories, or shrink down to one, but it is still the same house type: stacked floors, each with essentially two rooms divided by a circulation core. It is frequently the case that single houses have double piazzas now, one on top of another, but there is some evidence that up until about 1840 they only had one piazza, at the entrance level. If this is true, and it seems to be, it makes it more difficult to accept the argument that the piazza is simply a logical response to the miserable summer climate in Charleston. In this view the piazza was created primarily as a sunshade to screen the living quarters of the house proper.[5] There is no doubt that piazzas do this very well, but it is difficult to argue that their primary purpose was merely this. As with the more general argument that the single house was a one-dimensional functional response to the semi-tropical Charleston climate, this contention does not answer all the questions that arise. Why, for example, if the piazza was conceived as a sun break, would it take about 100 years for

The ground floor street facade of the single house presents an entrance door bay with two window bays next to it.

Charlestonians to figure out that two of them stacked on top of each other would shade both the main floors of the house?[6]

It seems, in fact, to be the case that the function of the piazza was as an intermediate and mediating zone between private and public aspects of living in the single house. That is, the completely private realm of house proper and the increasingly public nature of the areas beginning outside the front door: the yard, the view to the street, the street itself, and finally the city as a whole. It permitted the house to turn away from the street but still act like a "normal" house with a street door. Recall the Charleston piazza is not just a side porch. The piazza door and its surround act as a screening wall, making the activities on the piazza at least partially private. This tricky entranceway permitted narrow Charleston houses to maintain their semi-symmetry as well as their semi-privacy. With the streetdoor screen, and the nearly unfenestrated back wall of the single house next door, the piazza provided a place where Charleston families could expand a bit.

But only a bit. The tradition until very recently has been that you behaved on the piazza essentially as if you were in public, rather than at home. This meant, for instance, that men would not remove their suitcoats while on the piazza even in the considerable heat of summer. This was because piazzas are generally at least partially visible from the street. They did not function as front porches did: that is, as an officially, publicly visible place buffering the house from the street. Rather they linked the house to the street by providing an intermediate zone, understood by Charlestonians to be both part of the house and at the same time visible – even if only imperfectly – to the larger world, and therefore a part of that world. You sit on a front porch to see what is happening on the street. You sit on a piazza to enjoy a modicum of privacy in a town where privacy is a rare commodity. The great American 20th century private area – the back yard – had not yet come to exist generally in Charleston. Either it was an area occupied by staff – slaves before 1865, servants after that, or it was where you kept your chickens, perhaps a pig, and the privy. Privies were disappearing in the 1950s and '60s, but you could still find the occasional chicken in downtown Charleston rear yards as recently as the early '70s. The back yard is, thus, a recent Charleston discovery.

By far the most common appearance of the house in the nineteenth century is in its working class version. There are hundreds of what might be called Chevy-version single houses surviving around town, especially in the boroughs settled during the 1840s. They are midway between the full-blown, grand models and the post-war freedman's cottage. Invariably they are two storied, with four rooms – two downstairs and two up. Occasionally they have a habitable garret, but usually not. They are close together, so that the standard single house rhythm of the house-piazza-yard is much speeded up. Nevertheless, all the necessary elements are there: sideways house, street door, piazza, and unfenestrated house back. For contemporary planners and designers looking to learn something from this type, per-

Single houses of the more modest variety. The house type has remarkable elasticity: it can expand and contract without losing its coherence.

haps the most helpful – certainly the most useful – thing is that these Chevys are very often found cheek by jowl with the Cadillac single houses without a jarring note. There are neighbors of working-class single houses, and a few neighborhoods – streets, really – of grand singles, but for the most part you can find a compact and thorough mix of size, which translates to a mix of class.

By this point – the antebellum years – the house type had become Charleston tradition, and if there had ever been some sort of original external pressure on property owners that had tended to steer them in the direction of the single house, it had long disappeared. This now was simply how Charlestonians built their houses and lived in them.

What we can learn from the single house

There are, I believe, things that can be learned from Charleston's housing story; things that perhaps may be found to have continuing use and value in the present day.

The single house, as popular and common as it was in 18th and 19th-century Charleston, suffered in the 20th. It was too local and out of the ordinary as Charlestonians shifted to more mainstream forms of domesticity. Early 20th-century Charleston has its share of four-squares and Williamsburg cottages, while single houses are pretty thin on the ground. Even old-line Charlestonians seem to have been a little embarrassed by their singular domestic past. *The Dwelling Houses of Charleston*, published in 1917, and still revered locally, essentially ignored the single house type. When it was necessary to include a single house in this book, in almost every case the exterior is ignored and the elegant interiors are illustrated. In the Depression, when it became necessary for the first time to provide housing for the temporarily down-and-out, the project that was built in the middle of town replaced a lot of old single houses with housing that, while pleasant enough, was unremarkable.[7]

Before continuing in this vein, it is necessary to turn back for a moment to make a point. Around 1850 an English visitor to Charleston observed what he obviously considered to be a remarkable phenomenon. He said that Charleston had no middle class, it was either rich or poor. My suspicion is that he was lodging with members of the former class, and that in comparison – in the view from the piazza, as it were—everyone else looked to occupy the latter category. But in 1850 the apparent difference would have been one more of degree than of kind, particularly when looking at dwellings. By 1850, the difference was the deadly one of complete otherness. The poor had been made to look poor, and present-day Charleston has its share of dreary and dismal housing projects that stigmatize their residents by the mere fact of their living in them.

By the early 1980s the then-new mayor of Charleston, Joe Riley, had recognized this. He was not alone in his concern, but he had a weapon to fight the drawbacks of mainstream public housing unavailable to most other public figures searching for an alternative: the advantage of local history. As the Charleston Housing Authority began to move into scattered site housing, Mayor Riley, more clearly perhaps than anyone else, recognized that Charleston's ace in the hole could be found in the single house. The whole idea of scattered site housing of course is that the previously stigmatized poor – stigmatized by their address, and what their address looked like – would be able to get out from underneath that burden by moving into more neutral, less distinctly poverty-stricken quarters. But how is one to neutralize public housing? In Charleston it was done by adapting a recognizable domestic form – the single house – to public housing purposes.

The flexibility of the single house provides housing authorities a way to avoid stigmatizing the poor when developing scattered-site housing projects.

New Urbanists, Andres Duany perhaps most vocally, have been arguing for years that people respond to differences in form in housing more immediately than they do to differences in size. By approaching a recognizable house type for subsidized housing purposes the Charleston Housing

Authority effectively disguised its units. There is a lesson to be learned here, one whose subtlety and sophistication are generally lost on the sort of builders and developers whose idea of good urban form extends to little more than porches and picket fences. Occasionally one finds something like the single house referred to as a "side yard house." This reduction of the type to a relationship between the house and its lot is an unthinking suburban degradation of what is in fact merely a part of the larger whole. Earlier I pointed out that many single houses are essentially devoid of windows on their backside. There are also many that have windows too, frequently windows that were added. But this characteristic has given rise to a distinct Charleston phenomenon known as the "northside manners." You may have windows on the backside of your house, but you are not supposed to look out of them. You may not comment on anything that you see in your neighbor's yard, since this would be an admission that you had violated the privacy principle. It is perhaps a little comical to put it this way, but the principle makes a lot of sense in Charleston, which has a city fabric that is remarkably dense by American standards. The single house requires a neighboring house to be complete. Paradoxically you need your neighbor to have your privacy.

Because style is frequently confused with typology by people who don't think very hard about the differences, it is often the case that people – too frequently architects – object to contemporary revivals of the single house form as a supposed manifestation of social conservatism, along the lines of objections to the current preoccupation (in some quarters) with front porches. But in Charleston at least, large parts of the urban fabric have developed to accommodate the single house. One may, in fact, rightly object to the efforts of those who have ignored that fabric and have attempted to impose thoughtless alternatives on it.

On the other hand, it is possible to find in Charleston examples of typological continuity that transcend mere issues of style. On one block, for instance, one can find nearly 150 years of building evident in five contiguous houses. One dates to around 1840. There are two other 19th-century examples, and two were built after the devastation of Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Further, they are all right next door to a big, early 19th-century plantation-style house. As straightforward as the single houses are, they do not detract from the grandeur of the big house. But neither is the grand house necessary to the dignity of the single houses, which do not suffer unduly by proximity. It is also a practical (and not insignificant) fact that the property value of the big house has not been diminished because it happens to be located next to these small houses.

Although the Charleston single house is indeed a singular form, I want to argue that what it primarily demonstrates is the value of architectural type in relation to place. But this does not mean that all types are equally useful or valuable. The postwar American ranch house is a type that is neither as useful nor as valuable as the single house as a definer of coherent urban form. Whenever ranch houses are introduced into towns and cities the urban form is quickly reduced to incoherence. I am certainly not arguing that if we are ever to learn how to speak clearly again as urbanists and designers we must return to the single house. But I do suggest that it has much that we should value as a form in itself, as a form that carries with it suggestions of a particular manner of thought and living, and finally as a yardstick – if not a rule – of good architectural and urban design.

Notes

[1]These "houses stand sidewaie backward into their yards, and onely endwaies with their gables towards the street." T. Fuller, *Worthies, Exeter*, quoted in A.R. Huger Smith and D.E. Huger Smith, *The Dwelling Houses of Charleston, South Carolina*, New York, 1917 (facsimile edition, Diadem Books, New York, n.d.), p. 43.

[2] The drawing in Plate 2, from *The Dwelling Houses of Charleston*, was made in the early 20th century and represents the house as having a door at the street front, but next to the house proper. This opened onto a sort of gallery, called a piazza, that led as far as the front door, which opened in the middle of the long side of the house. According to Jonathan Poston, however (*The Buildings of Charleston*, Columbia, S.C., 1997, p. 73), the piazza dated to only the late 19th century. It seems to me, however, much more likely that the late-19th-century owners were attempting to bring the Brewton house more into conformity with what Charleston single houses were understood to be, than that it actually constitutes some presumed "early form" of the type.

[3] The use of the Italian word piazza to refer to a covered porch or walk is a standard 18th-century piece of English misunderstanding, derived from the Inigo Jones' Covent Garden of 1631. Jones, who was an Italophile – or at least a Palladiophile – created the first public square in England and called it a piazza, since he had been in Italy and had seen them. His fellow countrymen, most of whom had not had the pleasure of knocking around northern Italy, thought that the term piazza referred to the covered walkways edging the square on two of its sides, rather than to the open market space in the center. By the middle of the 18th century, Dr. Johnson's dictionary defined piazza solely as "a walk under a roof supported by columns."

[4] I want to thank Carter Hudgins, director of Historic Charleston Foundation, for this piece of information.

[5] If this were the case then it should follow that all piazzas would shade the western or southern faces of the houses that they were on, since these sides receive the fiercest direct sunlight. But since there are at least a few single houses with their piazzas on the "wrong side," this reductivist explanation fails to satisfy.

[6] The reader may perhaps have noticed that I have avoided the entire issue of the dating of the single house type. This is because it is essentially unknown. Gene Waddell, a knowledgeable student of Charleston architecture, feels that the single house was invented in the aftermath of the fire of 1740, which destroyed a substantial part of the town. Kenneth Severens, who is presently researching just this question, is working on the hypothesis that the single house appears in the later colonial period, but does not tie it to any particular Charleston disaster. Though no hard evidence has yet come to light, it may not be unreasonable to peg the first appearance of a recognizable single house to around the middle of the 18th century. This would mean that for nearly the first century of its existence, single houses were fitted with only a single piazza.

[7] The Robert Mills Manor is, by the general standards of American public housing, of very high quality. It is also located immediately adjacent to highly sought-after residential areas. The new housing blocks that were constructed in 1937 have little that relates them to Charleston, but in a couple of cases single houses that stood on the site were incorporated into the housing.